

Extract from Video : Harun al-Rashid & Al-Mamun, The Patrons of the Golden Age

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May the victims of Christchurch massacre be blessed in afterlife and may Allah bring peace to their families and loved ones. Together,

Harun al-Rashid and Al-Mamun started a tradition of funding research in the Islamic world. They were, by no means, the only patrons. Many Emirs and Sultans, all around the Muslim world sponsored scholars but these two were the ones who started it all. Their successors carried these traditions for the next five hundred years till they handed the baton to the Europeans. Sorry about the audio quality in this video. I had a bit of a microphone problem but I've got that figured out now and in the future, the audio quality be better. Don't forget to like, comment, share and subscribe. Disclaimer: The maps and flags in the video are not 100% accurate. Some maps and flags are difficult to find and so, are estimations. Be sure to check out my Patreon Page. Even if you can't pledge, still visit it and check out the content I'll post there.

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On the night between 13th and 14th of September, 786 CE, the Abbasid Caliph Al-Hadi passed away. His brother Harun al-Rashid ascended to the throne. On the same night, the future caliph, Al-Ma'mun was born. Harun became a father and the caliph, within the same night. This night is now remembered as the Night of the Three Caliphs. Before the Abbasids, the first Umayyad Caliph, Muawiyah had collected many manuscripts in his personal library in Damascus. However, he didn't have texts from Hellenistic or Pagan faiths translated because he didn't want them to influence Islam in its infancy. Even Though, the Umayyads started this, they didn't go much further because of Civil Wars, notably The Crisis of Succession after Muawiyah II's death and then, obviously, the Abbasid Revolution, both of which happened within seventy years and hindered any Umayyad attempts at sponsoring scientific research. The Abbasids came to power with the support of the Persian, so, even though, they were ethnically Arab, they modelled themselves more Persian than Arab. As a result, Abbasids took many traditions from the Persians. The Persian Sassanids had a certain love for knowledge. Their great king, Khosrow I, also known as, Anushirwan, had collected many scientific works during his reign. He had them translated to Persian and stored in the great academy of Gundishapur. He was a patron to many scholars of his era. So, looking towards Persians like him, the Abbasids tried to do the same. Another reason for why the Abbasids and before them, the Umayyads, wanted to sponsor scientific works was because, I think, they felt like a backwater civilization. Arabs were, till recently, tribes living in a very hostile environment, fighting each other over basic resources like water. They didn't have

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much culture, other than poetry and storytelling. Maybe, when they looked at the Greek Byzantines or the Persian Sassanids, they felt envious and wanted to have the same prestige, to commission works of art and build astonishing buildings. Muawiyah actually modelled himself after the Byzantine Emperor, he built a royal court in Damascus, like the one in Constantinople. So, I do think that the Arabs wanted to have a legacy. The final reason, and this is the controversial one, was religious. The very first word of the Qur'an revealed to Muhammad was "Read!". The Qur'an mentions seeking wisdom again and again. When Muhammad took prisoners after the Battle of Badr, their ransom was that those who are literate must teach ten Muslims to read and write, each. Many examples can be found from the Qur'an and Muhammad's life that preach the importance of learning, not just Islam but also, other things. Muhammad is recorded to have said, These days many people reject this reason because then, they'd have to admit that religion might've been the reason for SOMETHING good, after all. You might argue that Muhammad and the Qur'an only meant religious studies but you can make the same case for the opposite as well. When Harun al-Rashid came to power, the Abbasid Empire was going strong. It was controlling a majority of the trade routes between the East and the West. It was controlling the fertile plains of the Nile and the Euphrates. Wealth was flowing into Baghdad. More gold than the Abbasids knew what to do with and as you might know, you can't spell Golden Age without Gold. Harun decided to use that money to fund scholars, writers and artisans. Harun is probably the most well-known caliph. Even in western countries, Harun's name is more than famous than any other caliph. There's poems about him, written by poets like Tennyson. This comes from the romanticization of Harun through works of literature like Arabian Nights. In fact, I think if Harun knew he'd be remembered through stories and anecdotes, he would probably smile because during his lifetime, Harun loved storytelling. He had been educated in theology, philosophy & poetry. I think that was one of the reasons that motivated him to sponsor science and culture. We don't really know where the House of Wisdom came from. It was either established by Harun al-Rashid or his grandfather, Al-Mansur. Al-Mansur, after founding the city of Baghdad, had kept a library of books and manuscripts in his palace. He might've even moved Muawiyah's personal collection there as well. Muawiyah's collection was also called The House of Wisdom. It's possible that Harun made that library open to scholars or maybe he created a new complex to serve as a center of learning in the tradition of the Library of Alexandria. There haven't been any archaeological discoveries so our understanding of the House of Wisdom is vague because it mostly comes from records kept by people who worked there. Harun attracted scholars from all over the empire by making sure they were paid very generously. Their salaries at that time compare to modern day athletes. As other centers of learning around the world were in decline, the House of Wisdom was flourishing. The budget of the House of Wisdom is said to be equivalent of double the budget of the United Kingdom's Medical Research Council. So, scholars from all over the world came over to Baghdad. This created a diverse environment. People of different faiths, cultures, backgrounds were intermingling, adding to each other's understanding of the world. Must've been quite a sight. As Bernard Lewis said... Throughout his reign, Harun sent many diplomatic missions to Charlemagne. Charlemagne, in case you don't know, was a European King. He was the King of the Franks. He also, later became the first Holy Roman Emperor. His grandfather, Charles Martel had defeated the Muslims some fifty years earlier in the battle of Tours in France. In either 801 CE or 803 CE or maybe even 807 CE, Harun's most well-known diplomatic mission arrived in Aachen, in modern-day Germany. This mission had many amazing gifts for the Emperor but the most impressive of them was a water clock. It was sent on the back of an elephant, which the European had probably never seen since the time Hannibal marched them over the Alps. According to the Emperor's biographer, According to Charlemagne's official biographer, the French thought the clock was an item of sorcery and they wanted it to be destroyed but luckily, wiser heads prevailed. Unfortunately, this clock hasn't

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survived but you can find other gifts from the Abbasid Caliph to Charlemagne in various museums all around Europe. Harun passed away in 809CE. After him, his son Al-Amin became caliph, he ruled for a short period of time before he was overthrown by his older half-brother, Al-Mamun. Al-Mamun was a rationalist. He was a follower of the Mu'tazila school of theology. This school was more based around logic and reason, well, at least, as much reason as you can have with religion. When I was younger, I once heard my father call someone Mu'tazil as an insult, which tells you a thing or two about how they're perceived. The main argument was that the Qur'an was created or spoken rather than what the orthodox Muslims believed, which was that the Qur'an was eternal and uncreated, it had existed since time began. I know, it was one of those stupid arguments all religions must have one in their lifetimes, like how many angels can fit at the head of a pin. Al-Mamun started an inquisition but that's a topic for another video. Al-Mamun also started the translation movement. He is said to have decreed that a translator who translated a book will be given its weight in gold. Scholars of all languages were coming to Baghdad in search of patronage. Arabic was a lingua franca in the empire. Everyone from Tunisia to Persia could speak some of it because of it being the language of Islamic scripture. So, it allowed for ideas to flourish. Even today, when you look at Egypt and Iran, you don't really see the same country. They have different languages, culture and traditions but back then, they all came together because they were part of the same empire and spoke a common second language. Al-Mamun sent emissaries to Constantinople, Sicily and Crete to ask for books and manuscripts. Both Crete and Sicily were independent Muslim emirates at the time. This result in around three ships full of ancient Greek texts coming to Baghdad. Al-Mamun went so far in his passion for books, in a peace treaty with the Byzantine Empire, he ordered them to hand over the books in their possession. One of these books was Claudius Ptolemy's Almagest, one of the most influential scientific texts of all time, During Al-Mamun's reign, Alchemy reached a great height. These days, it's considered a fringe pseudoscience but back then, it was considered the most prestigious subject. Other than Witches looking to kill wraiths, it was practiced by serious scholars. Their main focus was trying to convert cheaper metals, like lead into more precious ones, like gold which never really worked but laid the groundwork for modern chemistry. Through Al-Mamun's patronage, Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khwarizmi founded Algebra and popularized the Hindu-Arabic numeral which we use today. Ironically Al-Khwarizmi was neither Hindu nor Arab. He was Persian. Al-Mamun also installed Hunayn ibn Ishaq Al-Ibadi as the head of the House of Wisdom. It's said that to check his ethics, Al-Mamun asked him to create some poison for him so he could kill his enemies. Hunayn refused and Al-Mamun kept him imprisoned for some time to break him but he kept to his morals. Al-Mamun and his successor also tried to regulate pharmacies by creating laws that would require them to only operate if they had a license. To solve conflict of interest, physicians were banned from owning or having any shares in pharmacies. The Caliphate even established a kind of universal health care by prohibiting doctors from turning away the sick. My American viewers would probably not get what this means but well... Al-Mamun has a crater named after him on the Moon because of the contributions made to science during his reign. During a trip to Egypt, Al-Mamun ordered a tunnel dug into the Great Pyramid of Giza to look for knowledge and treasure. This passage, which was later named the "Robbers' Tunnel" is the path along which tourists enter the pyramid today. He died shortly after. Together, Harun al-Rashid and Al-Mamun started a tradition of funding research in the Islamic world. They were, by no means, the only patrons Many Emirs and Sultans, all around the Muslim world sponsored scholars but these two were the ones who started it all. Their successors carried these traditions for the next five hundred years till they handed the baton to the Europeans. I would like to end with another thing Bernard Lewis said. See you next time. Since we've been discussing patrons of art, science and culture throughout the video, I wanted to tell you that I now have a Patreon account where you can support me by

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pledging a dollar or more per month. Even if you can't, still, take a look at it because I'll be using it as my primary social media account. Although, if you pledge some money, you get some really cool perks so, take a look.